STORIES

Souribandhu Kar





Translated by
Supriya Kar

Stories

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With a Foreword by Ganeswar Mishra

Translated from the Oriya by
Supriya Kar



RUPANTAR

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For My Father

I love your Majesty
According to my bond;
Nor more nor less.
Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you...

(Courtesy: William Shakespeare, King Lear, Act-I, Scene-I)

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Foreword

Souribandhu Kar (b.1948) is a well-known Oriya author, who has published three volumes of short stories, biographies of Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Swami Vivekananda, Maa Sarada Devi, Harekrushna Mahtab, Ambedkar and a large number of articles on literary, social and economic issues. He is also a social activist and a trade union worker.

Stories is a collection of Kar's ten short stories translated into English by Supriya, his daughter, who teaches in a college in Bhubaneswar.

These stories deal with a variety of themes such as freedom struggle, poverty, hypocrisy, childhood memories. What makes the stories remarkable is the author's intimate understanding of the life and the suffering of the poor and the down-trodden.

Written in a lucid, idiomatic style, Kar's stories are extremely readable and moving. Particular mention may be made of 'Reminiscences' which records the experience of a fatherless child growing up in a remote village in Orissa. The story conveying a sense of nostalgia for a lost world is perhaps the finest in this collection.

Ganeswar Mishra
President, Orissa Sahitya Akademi.

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Translator's Note

Translation demands a kind of clinical detachment from the original text, which may not be possible all the time, especially when the author you are translating is someone you know intimately. But I have most of the time been the first reader of the stories in this collection and the first critic of them. This I think has aided me while translating these stories.

As the author says in one of his prefaces, 'I can never reread and revise a story after I write it. Whenever an event fascinates me, I try to dramatise it in my writing. So myths, symbols, techniques that normally enrich a story might be absent in mine. I record in my stories the events that take place around me. I try to tell a story to the readers in as straightforward a manner as possible trying not to worry about either admiration or criticism. I present the sighs and smiles of my characters as they echo within me. I never feel threatened by a sense of rejection, for a new born baby may roll on dust, yet it wins everybody's affection. Likewise, I hope, my readers would accept my stories.'

Despite the author's claim to be detached, his writing has an underlying passion. It stems from the belief that a writer must have a social commitment and responsibility towards his fellow human beings. His wide experience as an activist enables him to understand the social

conditions that impoverish the human spirit and induce the worst behaviour.

The stories in this collection are linked by a preoccupation with the frailty of the human nature. It depicts the life of ordinary people who are caught in the prosaic struggle for existence. Focusing on ordinary situations in the lives of these people, they reveal envy, hypocrisy, selfishness and vanity. They depict the petty limitations, the dissimulations and pretensions inherent at different levels of society. The poor characters whose existences are governed by a desperate need to keep up appearances people these stories.

Reminiscences

I

Talking about your personal experiences means you read out chapters from the book of your own life. However, it is no easy task, for one discovers one's real self only in the course of telling someone about it. There is always this fear of getting confused in the process of self-discovery. How many of us really understand ourselves, after all?

Gandhiji says in his autobiography, 'I never wanted to write an autobiography. My life is nothing but a series of experiments with truth. I simply wanted to tell this.'

Here I want to tell of persons who were an inseparable part of my life and how they had influenced me.

I am not a charismatic figure. My achievements are few. Perhaps before my death, I may attain a little fame. Or so do I hope. Some may bring petals of flowers to sprinkle over me or walk in my funeral procession when I would be lying lifeless. And one or two of my acquaintances may write my obituary.

But now is not the time to think of death. Death comes without a warning.

My childhood reading of the *Bhagabat* has influenced my understanding of death to a great extent. My mother, when I was a child, had brought a copy of the *Bhagabat* and handed it to me, "God saves the meek. You have no father to look after you, to comfort you. So read the *Bhagabat*."

My mother was the first teacher in my life. I had lost my father when I was three. I can't remember anything distinctly about him now. But I never felt the absence of a father. My mother gave me everything I needed: authority and affection. Perhaps because of this my fondest memories always centre on her.

My maternal uncle's house was a little distance away from our village. It was just down the bridge that goes over river Brahmani. On the riverbank stands Gokarneswar temple. A guest house has been built there. And the management of the temple is in the hands of the temple trust. The temple rises into view when you cross Jaraka square and go towards Brahmani bridge. A magazine, *Gokarnika* is being published from here.

My grandfather worked as a priest there. Every day he would bring milk, wood apple leaves, and water from river Brahmani to offer to the deity. I was still a child. I would run after my maternal grandfather whenever I went to my maternal uncle's house. The temple is very famous. People from villages nearby come with their families to have a darshan of the lord even when the river is in spate.

The name of my maternal uncle's village is Odanga. I never knew or tried to find out why it was given such a peculiar name. Barabati is not far away from there. Singhpur lies a little further off. Every year a huge fair takes place there. We would go there crossing fields. Now, only the national highway runs straight past the village from which dusty roads wind into villages.

It takes two hours to reach Odanga from our village through the fields. We would also pass through villages on our way. In our village the thatched houses did not stand in a row. One comes across thatched houses arranged neatly in rows only in areas and around Puri.

When we passed through villages, we would come across fields, where different kinds of vegetables were grown. Odanga was famous for its potalas, ridge gourds, brinjals, bitter gourds, tomatoes, cucumbers, and chhachindra.

We would walk past sugarcane fields where sugarcane would be crushed with the help of bullocks. Someone would offer us a glass of sugarcane juice when we moved closer; sometimes he would cut a piece of sugar cane and offer it to us. Now, even in towns sugar cane juice is sold in every lane. But the taste of sugar cane differs from the taste of its juice. Sugarcane has a different and special taste.

When you go it was only natural to step on mud and cow dung! No one ever could walk so carefully as to escape these. And sometimes we would tread on thorn bushes. And we would also pass through muddy waterlogged paths.

My thread ceremony was held when I was aged eleven. I was then studying in class five. My mother was very worried about my thread ceremony; it was an extremely important event for her. I still remember that all the important persons of our village had come to attend this ceremony. An elderly person of our village, whom I called uncle, ceremonially gave me the thread. He is still alive, and I continue to hold him in high respect. After the ceremony I went to visit my maternal uncle's house. As part of the ritual, the brahmachari had to have food at the maternal uncle's house before taking food anywhere else.

My maternal uncle was older than me by six or seven years. He was the apple of my maternal grandparents' eyes. My grandmother had passed away by then. I had never seen her. I don't remember any occasion when I had accompanied my mother to my maternal uncle's house. My mother was the eldest child of her parents. So my mamu always deferred to her.

My mother had told me to return in a day. I promised to do so and set off with my uncle. Fields laden with crops stretched for miles around. When we went through the field hedges we saw snakes, mongooses and other poisonous reptiles, which made us scared.

My head was shaven, I wore rings in my ears and I had a pig tail at the back of my head. I carried with me a jute bag in which I had put the clothes, towels etc that I had worn during the thread ceremony.

When I reached my mamu's house his father was not at home. He had started a *Bhagabat* recital week at the Gokarneswar temple which stood at the outskirt of the village. I took a dip in river Brahmani and went to my grandfather. When he saw me, he at once said, 'Let's see, if you can read the *Bhagabat*.'

I wore a panchi and started reading the *Bhagabat*. From childhood I had practised reading loudly sitting on a mattress made of coconut and palm leaves. Tables and chairs were hard to find those days.

I started, saying 'Narayana namstutam' and continued reading the *Bhagabat* for seven days. I told my grandfather that mother would be angry with me for having stayed back, but he didn't listen to me.

That was when I got through the whole of *Bhagabat* written by Jagannath Das. I read it through- out my school career. It became a part of my life.

Beside the joy of reading the *Bhagabat*, there was the pleasure of having piping hot rice, dalma and saag. On some days, we had fried plantains and kheer. After making offerings to the Lord, we took the prasad with ghee. Even when we cook with extreme care, homemade food never tastes like the prasad prepared in temples. As an eleven year old boy, I could not understand the profound meaning of the *Bhagabat*. I only read mechanically. I had all the time to read those days. Now I have the ability to understand the *Bhagabat*, but no time to read it. River Brahmani continues to flow, but I don't know if *Bhagabat* weeks are celebrated in my uncle's village any more. Life marches forward relentlessly.

My grandfather is no more. I very rarely go to my mamu's house now that the childhood fascination with it has faded. When I returned home after seven days, mother scolded her father more than she scolded me.

I then realized that mother's affection for her son was infinitely deeper than her affection for her father. Perhaps this holds true for all women.

Even the *Bhagabat* appears insignificant before a mother's love.

II

On river Brahmani, a fair-weather road used to be built from Gopalpur to Dharmasala bazaar every summer. It was called Jagannath sadak. Dharmasala is an old police station under the Jajpur subdivision.

Every year a fair called Munsi melana takes place here. Earlier, police officials were called munsis. The fair had been first started by the munsi in charge of the Dharmasala police station. Hence the name. On the river bed a big haat is held. Taxes are collected from there and the money collected is spent on the fair. It is a large fair. As the munsis organise this fair, bimanas carrying images of deities are brought in large numbers. Makeshift shops with out number are opened there.

Once I had gone to see the fair with my mamu. I went there again, after I got a little older and when I was a college student.

People would crowd around the bimana of Lord Gopinath. Kirtanias holding a silver staff in hand would be dancing. People gathered at the fair would be enthralled by their ecstatic dance. Jagannath sadak lay a long distance away from the bridge. By the side of that road, the deities remained till midday.

Who would reach the fair ground first – this thought lay uppermost in the minds of people who came to see the fair. In the month of Phaguna, the warm morning sunlight caressed one's chilled body, and eyes were heavy with sleep. Still, the visitors stared wide-eyed at the images. No one had reason to be afraid of the police.

I had walked all the way to the fair with my mamu. My maternal grandfather had given me one rupee to spend. Laddus were kept stacked in sweet stalls. Womenfolk bought all kinds of trinkets. By the time the fair came to an end, the sweet stalls sold huge quantities of sweets.

Munshi fair seemed to me a very colourful carnival. The white karpoora garlands of the kirtanias changed colour and their white kurtas turned many-coloured while the horias lost themselves in throwing coloured powders.

People came back from Gokarneswar temple, chewing wood apple leaves. Their heavy lidded eyes would be half-closed but they looked as if they had won a victory over an unconquerable enemy.

Time has gone by; but nothing has dimmed my childhood fascination for Gokarneswar temple, Munsi melana and river Brahmani.

Now no one needs to take the fair-weather Jagannath sadak, for a huge concrete bridge gives access to the temple. Womenfolk come riding rickshaws and cars. Bullock carts are used but rarely. But the deities still come riding bimans.

Why do people come here in such large numbers? Because of love they feel for gods or for love for fellow human beings or for material gain? Someone feels ecstatic at a glimpse of the deity and rolls on the dust. A group of people drink the tale of love of Radha and Krishna which was sung by the kirtanias. Lovers give sidelong glances to their loved ones. I wonder if that warms the fairground. Now, whenever I cross the Gorkarneswar bridge by car, I automatically fold my hands in deference to Lord Gokarneswar.

Everything now seems like a dream: my going to Gokarneswar temple, chewing wood apple leaves, taking a dip in river Brahmani.

When I scolded my son who had spent the whole night at the fair and returned in the noon the next day, I realized that I had crossed the age of going to the fair. Now I was only holding on to the memories.

III

Mother called out, 'Arakshita, ajaa is ready, go with him to the haat and bring a pen.' I was around eleven years old and was reading in the fifth class. Our school was within a calling distance from our house. The school's headmaster was the village schoolmaster's son. My name was enrolled in that school. The date which was considered to be auspicious for me was registered as my date of birth. It was different from my actual date of birth. My age was decreased by two years.

I always came first in the examinations. Sometimes I stood second for having secured less marks in mathematics. I would write dipping an ink pen in an inkbottle. My mother would say, 'If you practice handwriting, then your handwriting would be good.' I would draw the lines with a pencil and practise two pages of hand-writing every day. Fountain pens were available then, but it was difficult to get these in a village and they were also costly.

I was selected to sit for the scholarship examination. By this time, another new headmaster had joined. He came from a village near my maternal uncle's. He was my mother's classmate at Madhupur minor school. He was a very strict person. He would lay sticks of different sizes on his table. Like a butcher dragging a goat to the block, he would take a pupil behind the door and thrash him. The poor boy would scream, 'Mother, mother.....' We were all very scared of him.

"Where is your fountain pen? How will you go to sit for the scholarship examination?" How the scholarship examination and a fountain pen are connected? Though I could never grasp the connection, he was able to persuade mother that a fountain pen was what I needed urgently. Mother called out to me. I was working out sums lying under the shade of a tree in the mango orchard.

"Go, with ajaa. And bring a fountain pen from Madhuban haat." My heart overflowed with joy when I heard mother say this. But we had to go to Madhuban haat. It was nearly four miles from our village. Kuakhia bazaar had not been set up at the time. Madhuban haat was very famous in villages nearby. Mahia ajaa used to go to the haat twice a week. He managed to earn a little from his visits. He was an expert in repairing watches and locks. Mother gave me a five-rupee note and asked me to give it to ajaa, 'Mamu, buy him a fountain pen. He is merely a child and easily can be cheated.'

Mahia ajaa nodded, 'Let's go. It is already 11 o clock. It would take nearly an hour to cover four miles.' I accompanied ajaa, bare of foot.

We crossed river Kharasuan and passed through Bhotaka village and Panchagochhia. We walked through crop fields. During hot noons, people of our village kept a close watch over watermelon fields. People also picked vegetables like brinjals, potals, phuti kakudi, and jahni to take them to the haat for sale.

Ajaa wore shoes made of discarded tyres. When I walked on the hot river sand, I would sigh. He would say, 'You know Souri; here you get very sweet melons.' When we passed through our fields, our eyes fell on a large watermelon. The field was then cultivated by a tenant farmer. We craved to eat a melon. From not so far, Mahant, our farmhand, called out, 'Ho, son of Kar family, where are you going with ajaa? Come, won't you have a melon?'

Mahanta was also my classmate at school. His father's name was Chakradhar Pradhan, but he was known as Chakara. He belonged to radhi caste. Preparing rice flakes was their traditional family occupation. By then Mahia ajaa had picked up a melon that lay concealed in the sand. Then he wiped off the melon and broke it open by dashing it on the ridge. 'Have a piece.' We resumed our walk eating the melon. The Kharasuan was shallow at the patia ghat, but water was crystal clear. We took water in our cupped hands and drank to our heart's content. We could hear the bustle of the haat

from a distance. The wind carried voices to us. Mango trees stood on both the sides of the road. Shadows of the trees fell across the ground. Ajaa was used to walking on this road, but my feet burnt. I hurried and took shelter under the shade of a mango tree.

It was a huge gathering. Someone carried a basket of vegetables on his head. People chatted about who had a good harvest of potal, who needed money for his daughter's marriage, who was buying a plot of land. They talked about how sugarcane fields got ruined, how this time during the fair, the kirtanias created a nuisance before Brundaban Chandra's bimana and so on. I tried keeping pace with ajaa. Everybody knew him. One would ask, 'Son of the Pani family, have you repaired my lock?' Ajaa would nod. To every enquiry he would respond by nodding.

We entered the haat. It was full of small platforms having palm fronds for roofs. Banyan trees, peepul trees, mango trees shaded these. There were only a couple of big shops. Mahia ajaa took me near the pen shop and asked me to wait there.

Everything seemed new to me. Many people from our village had come to sell vegetables. I looked at the pens arranged neatly in the shelf having a glass door. An hour passed, but there was no sign of ajaa. The shopkeeper, seeing a child like me, subjected me to a sort of interrogation. My legs started aching from standing for so long. I was too afraid to roam in the haat by myself. Mother had warned me, 'Never leave ajaa's side. Do as he says.' I felt like crying while I was waiting for him. I thought to myself, 'I am a big boy reading in class five. I am going to sit for the scholarship examination, would I be lost in the crowd.' I gathered courage and pushed my way through the crowd. I grew confident when I ran into Sudam Naik from our village. He pointed ajaa to me: 'He sits there.'

Mahia ajaa was busy repairing a lock. I went and sat near him on the thick root of a banyan tree. The haat was coming to a close. The sun poured down scarlet rays on the trees. We had to again cover

four miles on foot. At last, Ajaa said, 'Come, we will buy a pen.' We went over to the shop where he had left me before. The shopkeeper placed before me many pens. Ajaa picked up one and examined it. 'Parker' was written on it.

'How much does it cost?'- Ajaa asked.

The shopkeeper said, 'Four rupees and fourteen annas.' Ajaa handed him the five-rupee note. The shopkeeper gave back two brass coins. He poured ink into the pen, and scrawled something on a paper to check if it worked properly. I put the pen in my shirt pocket. We made our way back taking another route. Mahia ajaa boasted that he had used a parker fountain pen in his childhood and he predicted that I would definitely come out successful in the scholarship examination.

When I reached home, mother was lighting a clay lamp near the tulsi platform. She asked, 'Bought a pen? Show it to me, is it good?' She then looked at my pocket and exclaimed, 'How come there is a black spot on your shirt pocket?'

I discovered that the fountain pen was leaking and a blotch ink had appeared on my shirt. My Bou was furious seeing the black spot on my only shirt and at my stupidity. I was feeling hungry but only got two heavy blows from mother and fell on the ground. The parker pen, lying on the ground, was mocking at me. It was quite late when mother tapped on my shoulder and said, 'Come and eat. Go to Madhuban tomorrow and change the pen.'

The moment I woke up next morning, I remembered mother's words. I could not tell her that it was Ajaa who persuaded me to buy this pen. I mustered courage and set off again for Madhuban haat. But the shopkeeper did not recognize me. I returned home walking in the scorching heat, but my mother's anger scared me more than the heat. My face was pale and sad. Tears rolled down my cheeks, which mother wiped with the help of her sari end and said, 'Sit and have your food. You look like a piece of burnt wood. You Arakshit, poor child.' I could not say a word and burst into tears.

I went and sat for my examination with using that pen. My hands were smeared with ink. My friends commented, 'You would surely get scholarship. It is a good sign if the hands get blackened.' The blotch of ink on my shirt had faded by then. When the results came out, our teacher said, 'Your name does not figure in the list.' Mother said nothing. That day, nothing was cooked at home and everybody went with out food. After this, mother did not want me to continue my studies at the village school. I carried a jute bag on my shoulder, my clothes and other necessaries in it and set off for my piusi's house at Mangalpur on foot. When I reached her house, I found that my pen had fallen somewhere through a hole in my bag. I took admission in Jajpur high school and forgot all about it.

Today I stand in the Madhuban High School premises as the chief speaker in its annual function. I have put a parker pen in my pocket folder and look impressive. Many eminent persons are sitting in front of me and listening to what I said.

Many things have changed in between. The same banyan tree spreads its branches and occupies a huge space.

Everything came back to me in a flash. I was standing with Mahia ajaa to buy a parker pen. He was busy repairing a lock. I could hear my mother saying tenderly, 'You, poor child.'

IV

That a village boy like me would one day finish his studies at the village school and go to one in a town was beyond anyone's imagination. My mother was against my studying in the village school. As for me, I was thrilled that I would go to Jajpur to study. But my excitement was also laced with apprehension.

I crossed the Kharasuan and to reach my piusi's house, we had to walk a few miles. We had no money pay the bus fare. My grandmother said, 'It is not far away, we can easily go on foot.' We passed through fields. It took us nearly two hours to complete our journey. When we reached my piusi's house it was already dark.

My piusi was a widow. She was childless. But she was very short-tempered and she had a domineering attitude.

Jajpur was three miles from where she lived. I had no other option but to walk all the way to my school. I went and enrolled my self in Jajpur high school. It was a big school, and was quite famous. Sri Achyutananda Mishra was the head master and Mr. Narayan Chandra Ghosh was the assistant headmaster.

But Sri Raj Kishore Das, our head clerk, had more power than these two put together. He entered my name in the register. I could sense that he felt sympathy for a fatherless child like me.

Our school faced the office of the sub-collector. At the back of the school there was a playground and an isolated room where lived our Urdu teacher.

Historically, Jajpur is an important place in ancient times; it used to be the capital of Orissa. It is not far off from river Baitaranee. And the narrow lanes are lined with small shops on either side.

I was a student of the sixth class. Our class teacher, Mr. Bhubananda Mishra, who taught us English, was very strict. He would do sketches to explain things. My task was to bring the picture board every day to the classroom. I was made the monitor of the class. Without my knowledge, I started taking responsibilities.

Now, forty years later, I am going over these memories and returning to those days at Jajpur high school when I never knew what life held in store for me. I was then floating down the stream of time, and I tried not to get drowned.

I had to try hard to arrange so that I could pay the school fees. My mother had no money. My piusi would vent all her anger on me, by telling me off frequently. Yet, she would become restless if I got late. She would call out my name loudly. On Sundays, I had to work in her garden and help with planting vegetable seeds, weeding out grass and watering the garden. But I always relished the taste of toasted brinjal eaten with watered rice.

I would throw the bag on my shoulder and start for school around nine o' clock. I had no shoes. My legs would turn red as I walked down the dusty road. In Ashadh the rains turned the road muddy and slippery. Many students like me took this road to go to school. I belonged to a village different from theirs. So, sometimes they teased me. They would throw muddied water at me. One would pull at my hair. I would turn around and see faces mocking at me and hear the sound of laughter. My eyes would fill. I would remember my mother's words, 'God helps the meek.'

Every morning, I would take a dip in the canal and go to Lord Shiva's temple and chew wood apple leaves offered to him.

These were the six years of my early adolescence. Memories of Jajpur High School, time spent with teachers inside the classrooms come crowding into my mind.

I remember how Jagbandhu babu taught us to draw with the help of lines and circles. He taught us English in class ten. He would get

carried away while teaching us Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He was fat, fair and bald in the front. He would fill a rickshaw when he rode on it.

Many such stories of my childhood lie buried in my mind. I never understood the importance of writing down my thoughts. I could not do that then, have never been able to do that. It is said, 'What you cannot develop during your childhood, you can never do later in life.' The bad habits persist. The loneliness of the student life is still there and I am still without a friend or a companion. I go on paddling my own canoe.

The road was a slippery one. I too slipped and fell sometimes as I trod it. Youth casts its spell on all. I would immerse myself in the books which told of Robin, the pirate and his heroine, Meera and I would also read booklets meant for village women. They made me feel restless.

Sometimes I gave my piusi the slip and spend hours on end swimming in the river. I went to play foot ball in the funeral ground, sewed the ball with the help of my sacred thread. I started reading detective novels ignoring text books, playing cards with village girls and women. These were like water leaking into my life boat.

While doing all this, I was unwittingly hurting myself. Results of the matriculation exams came as a blow to me and hit me hard. I was placed not in the first or second class; nor even in the third class. No one could ever imagine that a student like me, who was the teachers' pet, would not fail his exam.

I could not share my feelings with anyone. Besides, my younger brother had joined me at the school and I also had to shoulder his responsibility.

But then may be I was not totally spoilt. Amidst all these I kept reading the *Bhagabat* and that aroused my consciousness. It made me a traveller on a new road. There remained always the fear of

getting lost, but I was fortunate that I reached my destination in the end.

I have lost touch with the friends who were reading with me at school. Now and then I accidentally met a few of them, like the clouds floating in the sky.

Sometimes when I go to Jajpur, I meet my teacher Bhubanananda Babu. My eyes would pass from him to the school with the wide gate. I would remember how Saraswati puja was celebrated in our school premises. All night we would collect flowers from others' gardens and also stole cabbages and vegetables for the feast to be held the next day. We would not notice how time passed while preparing for the puja.

From class sixth to class eleventh, for six long years, I was taught by four teachers. I had wanted to hold the fingers of one of these and walk down the path of life. I longed for guidance and love from my teachers.

It was the first time I went from a remote village to a town, small by the standards of present days. I learnt many things there, sometimes cheated my self and got lost somewhere in the crowd.

I went on to become a college student. The days I spent at the high school formed a part of the past.

Sometimes I remember how poignant it was to be a part of a large place, even though I was but a very small part of it.

A Day in the Life of Kailash Babu

Kailash babu turned over on his side on the bed. His sleep was getting thinner. Every day he woke up around five thirty in the morning while his wife and children lay fast asleep. He would rub his eyes and hum to himself a prayer to Lord Jaganath and search for his molasses bottle on the shelf. Then he would look in the direction of the toilet doors. He would wait for his turn; sometimes he would have to wait for one to two hours, because he lived in a building where twenty other families also lived. For all these families, there was only one general toilet and a water pipe. In Bhubaneswar, in many houses, every room has a toilet. But Kailash babu could not afford that kind of luxury. He was a mere clerk in a government office. So he had to share a common toilet with many others like him. Sometimes, the queue formed around 3 o'clock in the morning in front of the toilet. Occasionally, under the pressure of the irrepressible call of nature, Kailash babu felt like thrashing other people and rushing into the toilet, but he could never do that. His bowels would churn inside but he would sit quietly at his doors rubbing a pinch of molasses. The moment he found the toilet empty, he would rush into it. This chore out of the way, he would go and wait near the water pipe for a while. He never bought toothpastes that flooded the market these days. Instead, he used a little ash and a bamboo twig to brush his teeth. Everybody in his family made do with that. Then he would wash his hands and face properly and return to his room.

Children would have woken up by this time. His wife would start making a fire on the coal stove. Smoke would float all over the house and fill the other quarters. Initially, the smoke stung the eyes of the children and made them cry. But they got used to it over time.

He rarely had breakfast in the morning. He managed with a cup of tea, but, in these difficult times, he could not afford to buy sugar, or milk which sold at four rupees a litre. For some days he took lemon tea. But the price of one lemon being fifty paise, he now made do with raw tea. He would chew a few *tulsi* leaves with black pepper and drink a glass of water. This was his breakfast.

His family had also got used this. How could he ever afford to buy bread or biscuits? One day his children had pleaded, 'Father, bring biscuits for us.' He had given a long lecture on the benefits of *tulsi* leaves and how it helped prevent many diseases. He presented it as a panacea for cold, cough and stomach problems. If he was still so fit, it was possible only because of the wonders worked by *tulsi* leaves. The children got the point.

After 'breakfast', he would put on his glasses and go out. He would climb the staircase and appear in front of the owner's house. The two sons of his houseowner would be waiting for him. He had been coaching these two boys from the day he came to stay in this house. Kailash babu had never taught his own children. After somehow passing the matriculation examination in the third division, he had taken up a job to earn his livelihood. He himself had never found time to study, let alone teach others. But when he heard that the house owner was looking for a tutor, he promptly went to him and told him that he made a living by giving private tuition to children. From that day he became their tutor and did not have to pay hundred rupees as house-rent. In this way, he could save a hundred rupees through sheer presence of mind. When clock struck nine, he would make his way back to his part of the building. Again, there would be a crowd near the water pipe. All of them, like him, were employees in some office or the other. All would be in a hurry to go to office. He would not go near the pipe, but standing at a distance pour two or three mugs of water on his head. He often said, 'Women take bath inside a bath room, but he is a man.' Only on Sundays would he bathe for three to four hours to his heart's

content. He used a cake of lifebuoy soap to wash dirty clothes; then he would wash him self with the same cake of soap. Everybody had heard him say that washing soaps do a better job of cleaning one's body.

At ten he would start for his office, voluminous files tucked under his arms, wearing cheap slippers. He would take a few rupees from his wife to buy vegetables on his way back home. If ever anyone at office laughed at his slippers he would say, 'It is more comfortable to walk wearing light footwear. Leather shoes cause many skin ailments, and Hindu scriptures prohibit the use of leather." He usually bicycled to office, which lay three kilometers away from his house. He had got this bike as dowry at the time of his marriage. He repaired it himself on holidays. So the tyres bore many stitches. He was never tired of saying, 'Cycling keeps one fit.'

The moment he reached his office, he would open his almira and bring out a number of files. Now-a -days work did not interest him. He was already forty-five years old, but there was no relief from file work. He would take his pen out of his pocket and set to work on files. His face would be buried in innumerable files.

It was difficult for him to work for two three hours on end. But then even youngsters could not sit for more than even an hour at a stretch. They would go to the canteen to have tea. But Kailash babu always held that tea was bad for health. When at lunch-break everyone went to have a bite or lunch, Kailash babu would take out his tiffin box. His wife never forgot to fill the box with puffed rice. He loved to take puffed rice with a slice of onion. If any friend offered to take him to the canteen, he would decline the offer and say, 'I love puffed rice. Moreover, the doctors have advised me not to take any oily stuff. Then he would hold forth on stomach ailments, their causes and how to prevent these by taking puffed rice regularly. During lunch-break, his colleagues discussed everything - from politics to present-day social problems. They would predict who would win in the next election and

they would also argue in the defence of the parties they favoured. After two o' clock it was usually found that nobody really did any work at the office. But Kailash babu unfailingly remained at the office till 5 o' clock in the evening. Then he would put all the files back in the almira, lock it and go out.

He would unlock the huge lock of his bicycle and pedal slowly through the market. He would stop at Dama Marwari's shop. From this shop, he regularly bought the ration for a month on credit. This had given rise to an affectionate bond between the seller and the buyer. He had complained many times that at his shop everything is a little more costly than it was at other shops. But one day Dama Marwari said bluntly, 'Look, Kailash babu, when you take things on credit, you never get these at retail prices. As you know, the bank charges interest.' And could Kailash babu ever manage without buying things on credit? So, from that day he never complained about the price. But, as a matter of habit, he would cycle by his shop every day, though he bought provisions only once or twice a week. And, then he would go into the market and buy some seasonal vegetables that happened to be cheap on that particular day and pedal back to his house.

The loud voice of his wife would greet him from a distance. His eldest son must have quarrelled with somebody. Kailsah babu would feel upset. He would go and sit quietly inside his room. Though he always wanted to work on the files that he brought home from the office, he never could do so.

He would think of his past. His dream to own a flat and live with his family had remained only a dream. Though he had spent so many years in the capital city, he had not been provided with a government quarters. He would worry about what was to become of him. Now he was in the dusk of his life. Whatever he could earn, he earned. His dreams, desires and fantasies were never going to be fulfilled.

By the evening, all his children, except the eldest, would return one by one. His wife would serve them food quietly. He could hear his

neighbours whisper in their houses. His wife would put the children to sleep. The clock struck ten. Someone knocked at the door. Kailash babu would know: it must be none other than his eldest son. He would feel like scolding him, 'Here a father slogs day and night, and his son spends all his time quarrelling with others." Then he would control himself and keep quiet. Why should he tell him off? What could he give him as a father? He had stopped going to school from class eight. His house meant a little space where seven people lived huddled together. They had begun as two persons. And dreamed of many a thing. And then, each year, a child arrived and now there were seven children.

Kailash babu tried to sleep under an old worn-out blanket. After a while, his wife came in and lay beside him. But sleep would not overcome him. Nor was he excited by his wife's presence. Many stray thoughts crowded into his mind and lost themselves somewhere. He thought how hard he was working. He was not a spendthrift; and yet he could not make his family happy and content.

What would happen to his family if something terrible happened to him in an accident? Picture of families begging around the station floated before his eyes. Poverty filled his heart with self-pity. Then he tried to compose himself turning his mind to consoling thoughts. He was not that unfortunate. He would remember his neighbours. Then he would remember his colleagues at office, like him gasping and struggling to survive. Slowly, sleep would steal over his eyes and he would become unaware of his surroundings. The sound of his snores would bring an end to one of his care-worn days.

Fragrance of Baula

Biswanath, in spotless white clothes that adorned his six feet high figure, had taken a seat in the first row of the conference hall. The meeting had not started yet. The organizers were too busy to notice the presence of the guests. As it was pouring with rain outside, only a few guests could be seen in the hall. The chief guest of the function, the Minister of Culture, as was his wont, had not arrived yet. The roses and marigold flowers created the illusion of a garden. The young organizers kept going hurriedly from this side to that side and then to the other. Biswanath Babu, one of the invited speakers, sat on a chair as he waited for the arrival of the chief guest and for the function to begin.

It was no ordinary meeting. Like every year, this year too the Minister for Culture had been invited along with some self-effacing freedom fighters. Besides them, two other young speakers had also been invited. The elderly speakers had an unmistakable aura of experience and maturity. It seemed, as if after coping with the ups and downs of life, they were now preparing themselves for their final journey. They seemed to be relieved from the burden of life. Perhaps the worldly-wise conveners had in their mind to listen to those who had such vast experience of the world. But these days who bothers to listen to others? It was as if the wayward, carefree mind of these young people yearned to settle at some point.

Biswanath was an eminent freedom fighter. Influenced by Gandhi, he had thrown himself into the freedom movement during his student days. But as time went by the power-hungry Congress leaders disillusioned him. He turned to Communism. He believed that only leftist ideas could guide the poor and the oppressed towards the path of progress.

The rain-laden sky gradually gave way. Waters swirling down the road looked like scary river currents. There was no sign of a human being on the road. The conveners of the meeting looked very upset. The fear that the gathering at the function might not be large enough started bothering them. But soon the clouds dispersed and the rain eased off, which brought back smiles to their faces.

The Minister of Culture hurried towards the conference hall. He greeted Biswanath respectfully when they came face-to-face and apologized profusely for his delay.

The much-awaited meeting began after an hour's delay. The conference hall vibrated with the notes of the patriotic song, "Mother India, we hail thee". It filled everyone's heart with patriotic fervor. The reporters and the photographers from Doordarshan recorded the proceedings.

The guests offered flowers to the photograph of the great freedom fighter, Pranabandhu, which had been placed on a table, set in a corner of the flower- decorated dais. The figure in the photograph seemed real and full of life. He was wearing a *khadi fatei*. Pranabandhu was an eminent freedom fighter. He was the first to hoist the flag of independence on the soil of Orissa. An impressive crowd had gathered to pay tribute to his memory in spite of the rain. His name inspired a feeling of love for one's motherland and selfless service to its people. He was a man among men, one who never deviated from the path of truth. He was the sage Dadhichi for Oriya people. The sound of his walking staff could be heard in villages whenever floods, famines or any disaster for that matter struck them. His words solaced the poor. It is said even jackals and wolves stared at him in awe when he went through dark passes echoing with the sound of his walking staff hitting the ground. The British Empire could hear the voice of rebellion in his words.

The mud hut at Pranabandhu's birthplace, the home of his ancestors, had now been white washed and made to look modern. From here his

life had begun. As the place of his birth as well as his life-work, the village always remained dear to him, but his voice carried across the Himalayas, far beyond the fields and rivers of his village. The British choked in the incense-like words. Even the bricks of each and every school in his locality bore testimony to his dedication. His words, "All will be one, without any feelings of discrimination" is remembered even now fondly by old men and women as they reminisced in the evenings at the Bhagavat room.

Pranabandhu remained a source of inspiration for the youth, a support to the old, and a flame of revolution. Like a gust of summer wind, he had blown Biswanath away and thrown him on the thorny path of freedom. As Biswanath lay in agonizing pain, the comforting touch of Pranabandhu seemed like the soothing touch of sandalwood. It was he who had lured him into a life of struggle.

Decked with flowers, the photograph looked splendid. One after the other, everyone offered flowers to the photo. No one was requested or instructed. That long queue consisted of men and women of all ages- the young, the not so old, and the old. Biswanath's mind wandered back to the past as he stood waiting in the queue. Biswanath, now old, decrepit, and supporting himself with a walking stick, stood near the photo and looked meditatively at it. The garland in his hands fell automatically on the photo. He felt as if Pranabanhu's soul, which had become one with God, has again entered the photo and had started pestering him with a number of questions. He felt he had got entangled in a web from where there was no escape.

He asked, "What did you do, Biswanath? Where is the monument to our aspirations? Where had you been when the plasters came off from the walls of that monument? What did you do then? You were there as well as the others. Cobwebs filled the house, rainwater seeped through its walls and roots of wild plants made the walls crack. Gradually the bricks got loose and the house collapsed. How could you fail to notice all these?"

Biswanath raised his face. He felt as if he was once more engulfed by the hot summer wind that had blown during his youth. Only that no one's soothing touch comforted him now. He took the seat meant for him on the dais and looked at the audience before him. He felt as if every one in the audience, one after the other, questioned him and he had no option but to stand still like a convict in the dock.

Addressing the youth, the honourable Minister urged them to follow the ideals of late Pranabandhu. He said, "We are fortunate to have Biswanath Babu, one of Pranabandhu's foremost disciples with us. Unshakeable and patient like the Himalayas; he still spreads Pranabandhu's lofty ideals. Our country would reach great height if we take him as our role model.'

The Minister's speech was followed by applause. One after another, speakers, no matter whether they knew Biswanath or not, described him as a charismatic person more to flatter to say anything meaningful. Biswanath's image grew larger and larger in the public's mind. Their focus shifted from the one who was dead to the one who was alive. The audience present in the meeting waited patiently to hear from Biswanath Babu despite feeling exhausted by the speeches of previous speakers.

The president now requested Biswanath Babu to deliver his speech. The audience needed his guidance. He stood up to jog his memory and speak a few words. He looked at Pranabandhu's photo and started, "The august gathering present here! You have invited me to speak on Pranabandhu. But I find it difficult to say anything on him, though you eagerly want to hear about him. Born an ordinary human being, he deserves to be worshipped for the ideals he has placed before us". Tears started rolling down his cheeks as he said this and fell on his neatly pressed *kurta*. He tried and failed to contain the emotions overflowing. Pin-drop silence hung over the hall. The audience looked in awe expecting him to go on. He stood like a statue, unable to utter a single word. The audience applauded his pregnant silence. But he returned to his seat and sat down.

He lay awake on his bed, feeling restless. The memory of his intimate relationship with Pranabandhu flashed across his mind's eyes.

Their college had a strike and students had decided to bunk the examination. One evening he had gone out to meet Pranabandhu. He was busy writing his diary in the feeble light of a lantern. He raised his eyes and said, "Come Biswanath, please sit. I knew would come. When you are starting such a movement..." he paused. Biswanath kept quiet. After a moment he asked, "Have you taken any food? Hostels are closed. Where did you take your food? First have something, we then can talk about other things"

Biswanath took rice flakes sitting near him.

That day, during their conversation, Pranabandhu had said, "See, Biswanath! You are young. Your blood is hot. So you are excited about Marxism and other revolutionary ideas. But you need to study human nature first. You have to decide whether you have the courage to be a martyr to nation building. Otherwise, what course will any revolution take? You might enjoy playing with fire. But once that fire burns your hands, its very sight would scare you. If fear takes root in your mind, you can never overcome that. Beware of this but go on working. However painful and difficult it may be, you should always hold on to the truth." Biswanath returned the next morning. The memories of the freedom struggle, and then the life in prison rushed in after the memory of the student days. When he got imprisoned he stayed in Berhampur jail. He and Pranabandhu shared the same cell. Pranabandhu had read out the Bhagabad Gita to him. The memory is still fresh in his mind. Explaining Karma Yoga, he said, "Listen Biswanath, if you ignore spiritual heritage of our country, people will never accept you. Your novel ideas may stir them for a while. But these would not have eternal appeal. So remember why Sri Krishna had emphasized work without any expectations for results. And to remain detached." He talked about the lust for power in leaders. "Biswanath, if you get caught up in such battles for power, then you would be alienated from people. Like flood water dashes the bridge and flows over."

Memories crowded in to his mind. He learnt about the world from him. He had shared with Biswanath all his experiences and had explained to him how to complete the journey along the path of life. But Biswanath forgot about everything with the passage of time. Forgot the gist of Karma Yoga, forgot his truthfulness. Biswanath was a now witness to the corrupt becoming powerful. The plaster kept peeling off layers after layer. The bricks fell from the walls. Pranabandhu's image slowly dissolved from his sight as sleep overcame him.

Morning brought the same heavy feelings of agony. He climbed the steps leading down to his garden. A huge baula tree stood before the house. Pranabandhu was particularly fond of this tree. He had himself planted it. Ah, a huge mass of baula flowers has fallen from the trees. It was his habit to collect the baula flowers shed by the tree. Biswanath cast his eyes down. How fragrant these flowers are! He got into a trance. He bent down and started picking up baula flowers. He held a handful of flowers. Absent-mindedly he roamed in the garden while its fragrance engulfed him. Then he went back to his room, flowers in hand. The room held the fragrance of baula flowers. He took out the bunch of dry bougainvillea flowers kept long back in the flower vase on his table in the room before a portrait of Pranabandhu. He threw the bunch away, which got caught in a branch of the baula tree. Biswanath started to make a garland out of the baula flowers for Pranabandhu.

Twenty-two Steps

I had come to the Jagannath Temple at Puri after an interval of about five years. My mother used to feel intense devotion for and had great faith in Lord Jagannath. Her *havish* in the month of Kartik would never be complete if she did not have a darshan of Lord Jagannath. Every year, she made it clear to me that, no matter what, she must go to Puri in the month Kartik. She was confident she would be able to endure all hardships by the Lord's mercy. I was always surprised at her unshakeable faith in Jagannath. I too accompanied her to the Lord's abode. She would tell me to light a clay lamp and place it among the many thousand clay lamps burning near the Garuda pillar.

It is five years since my mother passed away on a chaturdasi of Kartik, one day before the full moon day.

That was the last time I had wanted to come to his abode, but could not. The wave of devotion that had surged over me receded by this sudden blow. I felt everything was maya, illusion.

Hindus believe that there are thirty-three billion gods. A specific god is to be worshipped for every specific purpose, and each has to be offered a particular kind of puja. For rain, one worships Indra, for fire, Agni, for knowledge, Ganesh and for wisdom, Saraswati. To beget a son, you need to worship Lord Shiva. Like this, there are gods and goddesses governing different spheres of our life.

At the outskirts of our village there is a huge banyan tree, where people offer worship to Goddess Kutamchandi. Last month, the Goddess appeared in Sapani Panda's dream and told him that she would destroy the village if a temple was not built for her convenience

under the banyan tree. Sapani Panda was known to be a pious man. Why should he tell a lie? The news spread near and far. Women in the village started telling each other, "The Goddess has appeared under the banyan tree and said that she would destroy the village if a temple was not built for her."

One morning, the sound of conch-shells and bells made the village resound. A temple was built for the goddess and the villagers started celebrating sankranti and amabasya at the temple of Maa Kutamchandi.

We have thirty-three billion deities like her. I wonder who we should worship and why? I found the answer at Jagannath temple when I was in such a state of confusion.

One of my relatives was holding the thread ceremony of his son. This had brought me to the temple. I sat on one of the twenty-two steps that led us into the temple and watched the people who came and went. I knew no one but I felt as if they were all my own, my very own. I sat watching little boys wearing brahmachari dresses coming to pay worship at the lotus feet of Lord Jagannath. There was a gathering of shaven-headed brahmacharis. They wore golden yellow dhotis around their waists and sacred thread on the shoulders.

The temple priests instructed them to prostrate themselves before Lord Jagannath and pray for fame and money. Their faces shone when they chanted the slokas. The priests were confident that they had mediated between the brahmacharis and Lord Jagannath and so extracted large sums of money from their clients.

Sitting on those steps, I kept brooding. I saw a sickly child, who had come with his parents. They seemed to have come from a village. They were trying to roll the child from an upper step down on to a lower step which thousands of devotees had trodden. Now and then, the child cried loudly. His entire body had come to be covered with dust. His knees were bleeding. 'It is believed that, if one rolled on these steps, all one's sorrows would vanish from his life'- the wife

said, trying to convince her husband. She believed that the child would get well if he rolled down the steps and got covered with dust. He was their hope. They had travelled so far, though they were so poor, only to save his life. They had surrendered themselves at the feet of Lord Jagannath.

A temple priest asked the couple for money, "You have to pay something, however little, even when you want to roll a child on the steps of Jagannath temple". The woman looked at her husband, confused. Can they afford to give so much money?

By this time, the child had completed rolling down all the steps. The priest would get angry if they did not pay him. It would also augur ill for the child if they displeased the priest. A nameless fear made the couple shiver. They fell at the priest's feet and humbly gave him all the money they had brought with them.

My eyes followed the couple with their child, happily descending the steps leading down to the Lion gate.

I found many priests busy offering oblations to the manes of their clients. They too demanded money. The priest would hand a list of the requirements for the puja and would go and bring the materials when given the money. Then the offering of oblation would begin.

An old couple were offering oblation to their deceased mother. They were bent under the weight of years. The old lady brought a dirty five-rupee note from inside her jute bag and slipped it to the priest's hand and said, 'What can we offer to you? Please accept this. We have come from far to offer oblation to our deceased mother. Again, we will return by bus. From where would we get money? Please accept this much dakshina.' But the priest would not be satisfied. He said angrily, 'Your ancestors would not find their way to heaven if you do not spend some money. Your offerings would be meaningful only when you give dakshina to the priest and satisfy him. If you can't afford to give dakshina, why did you come here? Can you receive Lord Jagannath's blessings in return for five rupees?"

The priest's words brought tears to the old woman's eyes. She took out some coins from a purse tied at her waist. "Take this. We have nothing more to give. We faced so much hardship to be able to come here." She said this, pulled her veil over her head, and kneeling down at the feet of the priest, paid her respects. The old man did the same. The priest, by then, had put rice, betel, areca nuts and other things which were brought for the puja into a bundle. He had tied the dakshina money in his waistband and started scattering grains of rice over their heads saying that all their hardships would vanish, and wishing them a long life.

This sight filled me with wonder. The old couple must be in their seventies or eighties. The debt of their ancestors hung heavy on their heart. To relieve themselves of this burden they had come to Jagannath temple. It must be long since the ancestors had passed away and travelled from this world to the other. Nobody could say if they had not been born again. But their progeny went on offering oblations to them at the Jagannath temple spending money and trying to placate the priests.

These steps lead us up to the Jagannath temple. Thousands of pilgrims, visitors climb on these wide open steps. They wish to have a glimpse of Lord Jagannath to wash away all the sins of this birth, the previous births and the births to come. Jagannath, the round-eyed god is omnipotent. By his mercy even a lame person can cross an ocean. The pilgrims would have a smooth passage through life. Animated by this hope and faith, groups of pilgrims rushed inside. Their eyes were lit up with hope and faith. It seemed to me as if Lord Jagannath was the saviour of all, who freed them from fear. The twenty-two steps lay as mute witnesses to this. For ages, these steps have been trodden by eager devotees.

The wheel of time has moved fast and I too was caught in its movement. I had no time to question anything. All I could do was to remember the events and characters and turn the pages of history. The story of Daru Brahma had turned into history. I sought to find in that history, the past, present and future of my race. The bustle of the temple is but a temporary phenomenon. The incense sticks, clay lamps and other offerings are all meant to secure material gain. A huge wall stood between the divine and the devotee. The wish to break that wall is nothing but a fantasy. Slowly I climbed down the steps and made my way towards the Lion Gate. I felt that the vastness of the Jagannath temple remained locked in history and legends. It is futile to search for continuity amidst the ruins of time. This intriguing question remained suspended in my mind as I descended the twenty-two steps.

A Conference of Intellectuals

At the local conference hall, a meeting of the intellectuals was going to take place. The meeting had been given wide publicity all over the town for a month. The advertisements appearing frequently in the newspapers had created such expectations in people's minds that, long before the meeting had actually started; people came in large numbers and stood in a queue waiting to enter the hall. The police had to step in to control such a large gathering. Someone was heard saying, 'Why this conference of intellectuals? Are only these people endowed with intellect and we are not?'

Intellectuals, whose names figured in the printed list of speakers, included the following:

Mahendra Nath Nigamananda Sarvakar: Eminent litterateur who had authored a number of books. He had received awards from several literary associations and held responsible positions in a number of organizations. Sarvakar's fame was such that he was described as the 'soul of the capital city'. Without him, the chariot of literature would not move even an inch forward. Everything that happened in the field of culture bore his signature.

Kanheyalal Lagu: Freedom fighter, political leader, and a believer in value-based politics.

Sambit Ranjan Pattabardhan: young journalist and editor of a newspaper propagating progressive ideas. Young people swarmed around him. He headed many political organizations.

Anand Chandra Bag: eminent academician, expert in political theory. He advised the government on policy making.

All of them arrived one by one. The conveners received them in the green room and led them onto the dais. Decorated chairs had been placed there. The meeting started an hour late. The girls sang loudly – *Sarvensha nou janani Bharata*... Mother India, we bow to you..."

Sambit Ranjan Pattabardhan, the young journalist, chaired the meeting. In his welcome speech, he said, 'The speakers present at today's meeting are eminent in their own fields and are distinguished intellectuals. They will show us the right direction through their lectures. In my opinion, the human race is passing through a critical phase. It is everybody's duty to save the reputation of our race. And we must take steps to accelerate the development process of the country. Hence it becomes imperative that we have a stable government at the centre. The stable government in our state has carried forward the developmental process in the last ten years. The hotel industry has grown in our state. Provision has been made for the unemployed to enroll themselves at the employment exchange. Industrial development has taken great strides. Women have got thirty percent reservation at the panchayat level. All these are the contribution of our stable state government."

A suppressed murmur filled the hall while the president was giving his speech. Someone was overheard saying that the hotels were selling a large quantity of liquor. The industries have been closed down. Women get molested in the streets in broad day light. Unemployment...Ha... Ha.... Ha.... these are rich people – what do they know about it?

The chairperson requested Mahendranath Nigamananda Sarvakar to deliver his speech. He cleared his throat and started, 'It is the job of the journalists and the media to give the public the direction they need. We call those who make a living out of their intellect, intellectuals. If journalists give us the true picture of our society, we would benefit immensely. But they are not doing so. A litterateur is considered to be

a visionary. He bases his writings on truth. Our state has a stable government. That is true. But the writers are flattering the rulers.'

While Sarvakar was speaking, one young man in the audience stood up and said, 'Yes, yes, you can see the truth. Have you ever written about unemployment? You have always tried to cover up the corruption of the government, haven't you? Sit down, don't give us too much philosophy.'

That young man had not finished saying this, when four or five young men stood up at once and marched menacingly towards him. They said, 'Will you sit down, or do you want to see what we can do to you? A few heavy blows on your back and you would come back to your senses. Motherfucker, you have come to show off as a leader! How dare you insult an eminent writer like Sarvakar?'

The audience started to murmur amid these heated exchanges. Sarvakar Babu sat down. Now Kanheyalal Lagu rose to his feet to give his speech. Some part of what he said could be heard; a part of his speech got lost in the commotion. Noise filled the hall. Everyone had started passing remarks on everyone else.

Amid all this bustle, a sturdy tall young man leaped up to the dais and addressed the audience, 'Brothers and sisters! Silence please. I am no intellectual nor do I belong to any particular political party. I am a jobless young man. I have in my trousers' pocket, the highest degree of the university, but I still haven't got a job. I am earning my bread by giving private tuition to school students. Let me tell you what is happening in the country in the name of stable government. Those are (pointing at the persons sitting on the dais) self-centered people. Their only aim is to strengthen their own positions in society. What can they say? Where are these writers who can raise their voice against communal feelings that are spreading like poison? Educated young men drive autorickshaws for they can find no other employment. The state cannot provide them better opportunities. Food for the stomach, cloth for the body — when a government fails to provide these basic

needs, how does it matter whether it is stable or not. The intellectuals who feel the government is not moving in the right direction should launch an agitation in order to change the system. Can these people ever do that? In the name of a stable government, we never utter what is truly happening in the country. Actually, the government is impotent and lethargic. So long as we listen to some idiots who regard themselves as intellectuals and as policy-makers, there would no change in the destiny of the country."

Silence fell over the hall. The invitees sat on the dais, hanging their heads. The men in charge of the security in the hall did not dare drag that young man from the dais. They wondered how he could say the truth with such courage! He was a real man!

The young man's speech was not over when a group of young men jumped on to the dais and carried him out of the hall shouting slogans praising him. The crowd rushed towards the entrance. That boy's name was on everybody's lips. An elderly person was overheard saying to his young companion, 'That boy has opened our eyes. These bastards have destroyed the country.'

Though the conference of intellectuals had such a dramatic climax, the next day's newspapers published a beautiful photograph of the intellectuals sitting on the dais on the front page. They also carried brief summaries of their lectures. That young man's speech was mentioned nowhere. Only a journalist of an anti-government newspaper added a line to the same news: one unemployed young man, responding to the speeches made, said that the government should try to eliminate unemployment."

The Death Anniversary

Suddenly I woke up. I did not want to leave the warm bed in this chilly winter morning. I was sleeping instead of chanting god' name and going for a morning work, which was what I did everyday.

I was fast asleep, dreaming. I had never seen such a dream. At least I do not remember, if I ever had. But the dream I saw shook the very foundation of my being like an earthquake shakes huge mountain ranges. But it did not break me. In fact, it left me stronger.

I never thought in the middle phase of my life I would receive so much energy. I had become lonely. It seemed as if darkness prevailed everywhere, then the dream dispelled the darkness like the morning rays of the sun. However, my mind was disturbed as if it had received an electric shock.

To whom would I tell of this dream? Certain things can be shared with others and certain things should be kept concealed in one's mind. You don't feel like bringing them into the open. But if I don't talk about my dream, it would be lost erased from my mind. When you share it with others, then it spreads its wings. I want to tell that dream before my friends because I don't want it to remain caged in the dark room of my mind.

In my dream I was calling out to my daughter, 'Milu, Milu, Sir is standing at our gate. Why have you not yet opened the gate? He is waiting for so long!'

Milu stared at me hard when I came and opened the gate, 'Sir, please come'

Milu asked, 'Where is Sir? He left us long ago. How can he ever come back? Bapa, I think you saw a dream.'

Sir said to me, 'I have been standing here for long and calling you. And you seem not to have heard my voice. Will you be able to carry on the research if you sleep your time away like this? When are you going to finish the book on Swami Vivekananda? How far are you into *The Bhagabat*?'

Milu turned white seeing my face. I was standing at the gate and looking at the young teak tree.

This tree was a mere sapling a few years ago. It has now grown to such a height. Sir had come the day after I had brought it from the nursery near Khandgiri and planted it. When he entered our house he saw the sapling.

He asked, 'What tree is this?

'You tell me?'

'I think I have seen it somewhere.' By then he had settled into a chair on the veranda.

He was leafing through the daily newspaper. He had forgotten his question.

I said that it was a teak sapling and it would cost around fifty or sixty thousand rupees when it is fully grown.

'Oh, I see, when we will build our house at Patia, we will make doors and windows out of it. What are you writing? We will hold a seminar on Vivekananda. Inviting someone from Belur math will be your responsibility. And you have to draft a letter of invitation.'

Milu brought us tea and biscuits.

He picked up the tea cup and asked her, 'You'll sit for matriculation exam this year, won't you? You are happy with your progress?' She nodded and left.

He rose to leave. 'I must make a move.'

I walked with him up to the gate. He turned to me and said. 'Finish the Vivekananda book quickly. I'll make arrangements to publish it. I will also do a review.'

He kick started the scooter and drove off.

The dream made me feel restless. It seemed as if he stood beside me and said, 'When will you finish the work? How many days will you take to complete the book? I will come tomorrow evening and see how far you have progressed.'

The telephone rang, and brought me back to my senses. Last year on the same day he had passed away in the afternoon. In a morning like this, he had phoned me.

'Hello.'

'What are you doing? At what time will be the meeting held today?'

'Sir, I am going to attend the devotees' convention. The meeting will be held in the evening. It starts at six. When will you come? I will come and accompany you.'

I put down the receiver and hurried through my daily chores. I wore a dhoti and a *panjabi*, and set off to attend the devotee's convention at Ramakrishna Mission. There was absolute silence in the hall. And a mantra rose of that silence: *Om sang gachhadam, sang badhawam...*

After paying obeisance to Lord Ramakrishna the devotees sat meditating for a while and then listened to the *Kathamrita*. It seemed as if nectar poured out of the mouth of the monk-speaker.

I was sitting quietly and trying to look at that calm divine figure.

It seemed as if Lord Ramakrishna was saying to me, 'My dear boy, never fear, I am with you. I am always there to save you from drowning in the sea of the world. You should never fear when I am around. This I have announced in the *Gita*. I have made Arjun aware of his worldly duties. You live in the world. There is no harm in living in the world. But live in the world like the water crow does. It lives in water, but water never wets its feathers. And if ever its feathers soak water, the bird immediately shakes it off. I am the master, you are my disciple. I am the engineer and you are the machine. Wherever I take you, you will go. You do not have will of your own. You do not have any 'ego'. If your ego yields to all the desires of senses, then you will lose your conscience, being blinded by attachment.'

How blissful. My mind was filled with divine bliss. Lord Ramakrishna's advent was meant to dispel ignorance from the world. He had taught everyone to see the universe as a manifestation of god.

The whole day was spent in singing bhajans, doing Kirtan, and reading from the Vedas in the prayer hall.

While I was sitting there, news that sir had passed way reached me.

That piece of news stunned me and I forgot about my immediate surroundings.

I felt helpless in his absence. I imagined myself to be losing the battle against life. I could not bring myself to accept that he was no longer alive.

Time moves on, no where it stops.

But what about human beings? Human beings stop. Time calls out to them, 'Would I leave you if you stop here. I have come to take you along with me. I will take you forcibly binding you hand and foot. I will drag you along even if you don't accompany me willingly. I have spared none. Even Lord Srikrishna was killed by Jara. I have separated Arjun, the valiant warrior, from his eldest brother, Yudhisthir. Whoever you may be, however important you may be, you can never stand before me. I take your bodies away. But I cannot take your ideals away. If I could, then the world would cease to exist. But I can never wipe away your deeds from the pages of history.'

I know I cannot defeat time. I cannot harm time. I have to go with time and enter into a compromise with it.

But sir would not again tell me, 'Come and take me to the math.' One day, he had said, during a discussion on Ramakrishna, 'How can you compare anyone with Ramakrishna Paramahansa? He experienced moment-to-moment samadhi. We are but ordinary mortals. How can we ever describe him? We are absorbed in enjoying life. He was the living symbol of sacrifice.' He would explain me the intricate logic of philosophy. No matter how I long for a loving person like him to talk about Ramakrishna for hours on end. The memory of the day remains as a wound in my heart.

Time to Return

The day of election was approaching. It lay only five days away. For whom will Sabita Reddy vote? Could she forget about casting her vote? She was a citizen of India and she had a citizen's right to vote. She had cast her vote during the three previous elections.

It is ten years since Sabita Reddy came to this village Kamakhand. She had come as a bride to this village from Srikakulam, which lies on the border between Andhra and Orissa. Her father Sri Ramulu had migrated from Berhampur many years ago. He lived with his wife and three daughters. He was a primary school teacher. He taught his eldest daughter Sabita Reddy.

Sabita did well at her studies. After passing her matriculation examination from Srikakulam High School, she underwent training in handicrafts. She hoped to be able to earn a little and add to the family income. If you have money, you have everything. In a poor family, everybody is required to earn, otherwise how the daily expenses could be met?

Sabita knew that her father would not be able to afford to give her much by way of dowry, as he was a mere primary school teacher. Why should she be a burden on his father? Again, there were her two younger sisters to think of.

Sri Ramulu had first come to Srikakulam some forty years ago. People found him a likeable person, one who could make others smile. The daughters were like their father, so the people said. They were not so well off, but they managed somehow. Sabita knew she would be hitched up with someone who would be from a family like her own. A poor girl's dream to get married to a rich man is but a daydream. It would never be realised.

Sabita never dreamt about her future. She understood her situation in life. She was born into a poor family. She had to struggle in order to survive. But she would not live alone all her life; her husband and her children would live with her. She would be a friend to her husband, in sorrows and in happiness.

Sabita looked at the horizon sitting on the veranda of a thatched house. That house belonged to Parayan Reddy. Ten years ago he had got married to Sabita. She had come to Kamakhandi putting sindoor on her forehead. The coconut trees and kia bushes looked exactly the same as they looked ten years ago. No change had come over them.

Parayan had lost his parents twenty years ago. His father had come from Srikakulam, and settled here to make a living by selling coconuts and kia flowers. People came and settled in Kamakhand building thatched cottages. This was a sandy area. Due to the sand mixed soil it produced large amount of coconuts and kia flowers. Parayan's father was a worldly wise man. He shaped Kamakhand village.

Sabita folded her hands and touched her forehead with them paying her respects to her late parents in laws. She had never seen him. Her parents in laws' photograph hung on the wall. Every morning and evening, she would draw her veil over her head and prostrate herself before it.

Sabita never knew what had taken Parayan to Srikakulam town, but they had met on an evening when it was pouring with rain. Nobody had ever witnessed such an outpouring of rain. The road was full of puddles formed by rain water. Sabita was returning to her house from one corner of the town. Her bicycle slipped into a puddle. How painful it was! She crashed like a felled tree, and if Parayan had not been around and had he not helped her, she would not have lived to see this world as she was able to see it now.

She was wet through, and blood oozed from a wound on her head and turned the water red. It was not possible for her to rise to her feet. Due to the heavy downpour, no one was around.

Parayan carried her in his arms, brought her bicycle and took her to the hospital. She felt faint. Two hours later, she felt a little better, and only then she could take a good look at Parayan. He was tall, handsome and fair. His kind eyes seemed full of love for everyone. Parayan was the first man in Sabita's life.

Sabita always flushed when she remembered that day. Sometimes Parayan would tease her, 'I saw from a distance that you fell into the puddle. The garbage of the whole town floated in it. Your bicycle rolled away. I was not sure at first whether to go to rescue you in the rain. Then, I went and lifted you up on. You were quite heavy. How difficult it was to carry you all the way to the hospital! Even if you served me for five life-times, you will never be able to repay what you owe to me.'

Parayan would smile as he said this. His deep love for her would shine through that smile. Sabita would look at him; she would not say a word. But in her mind she would think, why five life-times, she would not complain if she had to serve this man for forty.

Today, Sabita sat waiting for him.

The wind blew in the fragrance of kia flowers. The coconuts from the trees were staring at her, as if saying, 'When will you pluck us? How many days would you wait for Parayan to come?'

It was three years since Parayan had left home. Sabita, still did not understand what his fault was? Why had he been in imprisoned? Was it a crime to love one's land?

Parayan loved his land. The coconut trees, the kia bushes – everything was so dear to him. He was born on this soil; he had played, cried and laughed on it. Why should he be thrown out of here?

Sabita knew about the movement that had been started five years ago. The government announced that they had to leave their village immediately. A large scale industry would be set up. Money would pour in. People would find employment. Monthly salary, stipend, bonus, medical facilities, provident fund and finally gratuity and pension would transform their lives. They would get land somewhere else, to construct new houses in.

A job is like the comforting shade of a banyan tree. The owner of the industry came. Meetings were held. He tried to coax people to leave their villages. 'What will you get from this sandy place? How many coconuts you would get from these coconut trees? Would a handful of kia flowers help you in your old age. To live life fully you need money. We would give it to you. We would give you land, houses, jobs and security, but you must leave this place.'

But this would never convince Parayan. It was his birthplace. Here he had been born; there he had played, built sand castles. The fragrance of this soil has taught him love. This soil has nursed him when he lost his father and mother.

How could he forget this soil? How could he leave this land? This was not just any piece of land for him. His soul lay in this land. The bond that tied him to it was strong and intimate. Parayan became restless. He decided that he would never migrate from this place. He would live here, no matter what.

He looked at everyone's face. Fear and anxiety were writ large on every face, they had lost their confidence. He had known them for long. He had often gone out to collect kia flowers with them. They were his hope and strength.

How could they all leave this place? They did not need the security of a job, the shade of a spreading banyan tree. The fronds of coconut trees and the lovely kia flowers would do for them. Here, only in this village cremation ground would their bodies turn into ashes when they died.

They would live here; here they would stay holding their heads high. They would not let at anyone pity them. But, would they succeed in this fight against the government?

Parayan mustered courage. It was a fight for truth, for one's rights; it aimed to kindle love, amity and fellow-feeling.

Sabita looked at Parayan. He had such strong conviction! How dearly he loved this land and its people!

The fight began. The epic battle in the *Mahabharata* had lasted eighteen days. Who knew how long this battle would go on? Now, this too was a battle against injustice; a battle against capitalists, who were strangers to humanity, to compassion. This battle was against pride. This battle was waged by the weak against those who were strong and powerful.

The nation had already fought a battle on this land and the mighty British had been driven out. The weapons used in it were love and non-violence. Parayan decided to use those weapons again. He decided to use them on those who enjoyed power and thought nothing of selling off their country. They were deaf to the sobs of their mother. They could not see the tears in their mother's eyes.

Parayan looked at Sabita for assurance. He wanted to ask whether Sabita would stand on his side in this battle.

Sabita understood. She knew what was going on in her man's mind. She knew Parayan was going to fight for justice. He was calm, quiet and gentle. But he was a ball of fire.

Sabita told him, 'I am your fellow traveller and fellow worker. I am with you.'

Parayan led a movement the goals of which were peace, integrity, security. The struggle he started would one day find a place in the annals of history. And the fearful, selfish powers became scared when the fight began. The fire of the rebellion spread from Kamakhand to every corner of Orissa.

Parayan knew that in this struggle victory never came easily. It took time to triumph over money power and coercion. The struggle might take an unexpected turn. Who can predict the course of a river when it flows over a bridge?

But that should not deter one from fighting. Can he ever live away from his land?

Many of Parayan's friends came and joined the struggle. They promised never to leave their land, even if this meant laying down their lives.

That was the beginning and Sabita could never imagine how all this would end.

Parayan got arrested once, twice, and thrice. He was arrested for a different offence each time. Sabita would only look at him with tearful eyes. She would not be able to look into his eyes.

What was his fault? Why were they arresting him again and again? Was it a crime to fight for one's rights?

Who would answer her questions? Whom will she ask?

Sabita looked at the kia bushes. They were in bloom. Coconut trees were laden with fruits. Fronds of coconut trees swayed, shaken by the breeze. But Parayan was away. He lay locked up inside the four walls of the prison. He was not with Sabita and would not be able to eat food she had prepared.

Sabita found the situation oppressive. Her two children, a son and a daughter, longed to see their father. On some days, their son would not be willing to go to school and would not eat anything. They would plead with their mother to take them to their father.

Sabita knew that the kids missed their father. Parayan was in or out of jail ever since they were born. They had never known what a father's love was. However hard she might try, she could never take the place of Parayan. His being in jail made the children feel very unhappy. There was a void in their hearts.

She too knew that victory in the struggle into which Parayan had plunged himself was not easily achievable. She too had taken part in this fight. It was she who inspired other women to fight for this land of their ancestors and step out of the house. She was not a leader. She had no wish to become an activist. She only wanted to support Parayan.

She could never give any satisfactory answer when her kids longed to see their father. Tears filled her eyes. She would take them into her arms. She would kiss them and say, 'Why are you so anxious. He will come back in a few days. He would pluck the largest kia flower for you. He would pluck coconuts from the trees. We would go to the fair in Berhamapur together.

They would ask, 'And we won't go to Srikakulam, to our uncle's house?'

'Yes, surely, we will visit your grandfather and aunt.' The children would stop sobbing and look at her. Like rays of the rising sun, a smile would spread on their faces. A smile like Parayan's.

How long would she go on consoling them like this? She had never visited Parayan at jail. She waited for him. The company said that it had decided not to set up a factory here. Government kept quiet. Then why should there be so much delay in releasing him? He was not a terrorist. He had not conspired against the country. All he had done was to express his love for this land, its coconut trees and its kia flowers. He had loved this soil, the water and the air.

He would surely return. The elections were approaching. He would cast his vote. He would exercise his right to select the right person. He would say to her, 'Sabita, how can we save democracy in our country if we don't vote? It is our right to vote.'

Sabita would always go to cast her vote, persuaded by Parayan. She had realized the value of every single vote. Government had imprisoned her husband. Still she would cast her vote. Only when she did her duty, could she take the government to task.

The day had drawn to an end. The sun had sunk in the west. She had to light a clay lamp at the chaura. He might come home today. The newspapers said that the government was considering their demands and taking steps to release them from jail. She had been praying to goddess Brindavati for three long years. 'Mother Goddess, bring your son back to his beloved land. How much longer would he stay away from home?'

Yes, her man would surely return in the evening. It was in the evening when he usually returned after doing a day's work. She burnt a clay lamp near the holy basil tree. She drew her sari-end over her head and folded her hands, praying. Parayan would surely return.

The Diary of Narottam Sarangi

A boy, hardly of ten or twelve, was shouting at the top of his voice, newspapers in hand: Today's main news- Heart-stirring news- Read and Enjoy- Only fifty paise per copy- The Sun Kshetra Daily - Latest in the media world- News from every where; from Delhi to Bhubaneswar- News from across the country- Stock Market - Trade – Cinema- Weather- A.I.R. Programmme- Spirituality- Women's Issues- Matrimonial - Unemployment- Election- Astrology- Literature- Local News. The Sun Kshetra daily: Buy one- only fifty paise.

Today's special features- Announcement of the results of the Lok Sabha election- The Panchayat Raj bill rejected in Rajya Sabha - New findings on Bofors...'

He ran from one side of the bus stand to the other, then from one corner to another, screaming to sell the Sun Kshetra Daily. I gave him fifty paise and collected a copy and started leafing through it. The news, as usual, was predictable, devoid of any freshness. Re-election to Lok Sabha would take place. All the newspapers dished out information according to their own biases and vested interests. The Sun Kshetra Daily, despite its claim to be different and impartial, was predictable, all the same.

In one corner of the newspaper, which would not immediately catch one's attention, the heading ran, "An unemployed young man commits suicide." I went through the news item, twice or thrice and could not believe my eyes, "A young man called Narottam Sarangi of Ramaharipur, committed suicide by throwing himself under a train. Having remained unemployed for a long time, he had lost his mental balance. After the post mortem, the police would hand over the dead

body to his relatives." I sprang up from the long bench of the bus stand and set off towards the hospital. A constable kept a watch over a dead body, which lay covered in front of the post-mortem room. I asked the constable whether it was Narottam, who had killed himself by throwing himself under a train.

"Sir, I don't know. But I only know he was killed in some train accident and was brought here for the post mortem yesterday. I came here only in the morning. Please wait. You can get the details from the inspector- in-charge when he comes here."

I sat near a roadside teashop and now and then turned the pages of the newspaper, absent mindedly, my eyes fixed on the hospital veranda.

I kept mulling over Narottam Sarangi's death. His house in the village was a little distance away from mine. He was well known in the villages nearby as a brilliant student while he studied for M.A. His father was a schoolteacher. He had started a model school near our village that benefited students who came from the neighbouring villages immensely. His son, Narottam Sarangi, who bore a striking resemblance to his father, had a brilliant academic record. How could someone like Narottam Sarangi commit suicide? I folded the newspaper and put it into my bag. The clock struck 10 o' clock. Still, no one was in sight. I strolled to the hospital veranda.

Another half an hour passed. A hospital employee, who might be in charge of post mortem duties, arrived. He gaped at me and said, "Your relative? Who will bother to carry out this job with out tips?"

I looked at him timidly and then took out my purse. "Let this bloody fellow have ten rupees, vultures"- I thought to myself and handed the note. The post- mortem took almost four hours.

The inspector, exuding an air of authority, came out, looked enquiringly at me and then asked, "Your relative? You can take the dead body if you want to. Otherwise..." He shrugged.

I stood brooding. They would throw Narottam Sarangi's body somewhere and let it lie abandoned. Why have I come here and spent

the entire morning? I thought it was my foremost duty to carry out the last rites of this learned young man, now dead and gone. And repay the debt I owe to my teacher. I signed the official papers the inspector brought me. Now taking care of Narottam's body was my responsibility. With great difficulty I could manage to get a few men who bore him from the hospital to the cremation ground and prepared the funeral pyre. It was evening. Stars came out of the distant sky one after another and winked at the world.

I returned to my room carrying a bag, which Narottam had left behind. The day had left me dog-tired. I hadn't taken even a morsel of food during the whole day. Yet, I didn't feel any appetite.

Narottam Sarangi - a young man having a brilliant academic record – lived a life crushed under the burden of poverty, without a job and finally committed suicide. He was certainly not the suicidal type. Why did he then take his own life? Out of curiosity I opened his bag. A bundle of papers and a diary lay inside. I hungrily turned over the pages of the dairy. The entry he had made on the last day of his life caught my attention:

"I have decided to commit suicide in the evening. Nothing can deter me from this. I always thought others committed suicide, which was the last resort of cowards or may be, an act of courage. But this society, alien and indifferent, forced me to end my life. I feel suffocated in the prevailing system of oppression and drudgery. I am tired of carrying on this endless struggle. I can't go on like this. My strength fails me."

"I was born a brahmin. Perhaps, to be born as a brahmin, was a curse on me. My parents, who were responsible bringing me into this world, are not to blame. Where lies their fault? My father never turned away from his duties as a father. He joined the freedom struggle sacrificing a life of comfort to serve the country. But the ideals he had fought for changed after independence. My father could not cope with the changing times. Even my mother's untimely death due to his inability to buy life - saving medicines, didn't succeed in bringing any

change in his attitudes. He had founded his life on truth. His ideals shaped my way of looking at things. Now I find it hard to face the realities of life, the double standards of society, and its rotten core lying concealed under a glittering cover.

The slogan, 'Political freedom will be followed by economic and social freedom' has turned hollow and is nothing more than a cheap slogan. This society has undergone tremendous change. Leaders never brought together the people, but divided them in the name of caste or creed. To win votes, to rule, to prosper. Caste discriminations, communal differences, regional rifts are the channels through which political leaders come to power in a democracy.

I find myself a victim of all this. I am like Abhimanyu in the labyrinth of politics. The cold-blooded, callous conspiracy of the seven warriors has caused my death. My father, a progressive, recognized no discriminations based on caste or religion. He had built a school for the betterment of the downtrodden dalits. He had reverence for human life. His students have established themselves in society, holding high positions, but they would not follow the path of honesty and integrity.

One of them, Arjun, then a classmate of mine, is now an officer in the state secretariat. My father had borne all his study expenses. I used to help him with his studies. After he graduated, he became a well-placed official in a government department. But I didn't get any job. I tried and tried and at last lost hope. I met a handful of ministers, who gave only 'lip-service', some boastful MLAs who promised the stars and the moon. I ran from this end to the other in the corridors of power. Nobody cared for me. Nobody bothered. They only curved their eyebrows when they heard my father's name.

I wandered around the capital city to earn my bread. Noone ever uttered a sympathetic word to me. How many days would I have continued like this? I have certificates, a good career, and skills. But I could not make it in the job market. I failed to bribe someone to sneak through. I could not let myself sink to the level of a sycophant and crawl around corrupt officials. I could please no one. My desperate

search for a job landed me nowhere. Still, I had never thought I would commit suicide."

"One fine morning. I stood before a huge mansion. A nameplate hung on the gate – 'Mr. Arjun Das, I.A.S.' I opened the iron gate and went inside. A dog lay near the front door. It barked loudly. Startled, I stepped back two feet. Alerted by its howl, a peon came out and asked, "Who do you want?"

"Is Arjun in?"

"Sahib is not at home. Come some other time."

I could hear Arjun's voice from inside. His car was parked under the portico. This was not the only time; I went to his house several times. But I could never meet Arjun sahib. I finally met him when I attended a walk-in interview for the post of an assistant. I was one of the applicants.

I could not bring myself to fold my palms to salute him when I entered his chamber. Two other officials were sitting at the two ends of the table.

'Please take your seat'

I drew the chair and sat down. Mr. Arjun Das turned towards me and asked, 'Mr. Narottam Sarangi, you have a brilliant career, how come you are still without a job?'

'Because I am against giving bribes, incapable of flattering people and lobbying for myself and also because candidates belonging to lower castes are given priority though they don't have the qualifications'

'Stop it, you get out', roared Arjun Das.

Arjun was my friend. My father had reared him and helped him stand on his own legs. Today he is a bureaucrat and could throw me out of the interview!

I am Narottam Sarangi.

Caste: Brahmin

Age: Thirty years.

Father: Sanatan Sarangi. A recipient of the President's award.

Occupation: Unemployed.

I have no one in this world. My mother had died when I was a child, due to negligence. My father in his lifetime strove to lead an ideal life. He worked tirelessly for the uplift of the dalits.

I am his only son, Narottam Sarangi. Handsome. Educated. Equipped with an M.A. degree, I didn't find a job though I tried my best. I turned thirty. My father had breathed his last a year after I completed my postgraduate studies.'

* * * *

No one from his family lives in his village. He has left no land, no property, only a deserted thatched house, a charka and books. He got his house mortgaged and came to the capital in search of a job. His father had so many friends, colleagues, students, and there were his own classmates. All owned buildings, even mansions, and had plenty of clout.

Narottam searched for a job. He went to a minister's house, met contractors, businessmen, and several government officers but a job he never found. He had no money to give bribes, had no letter of recommendation from anyone, no caste certificate.'

'Who is your father?' asked his father's friends.

Narottam Sarangi lost hope. He did not have the strength to alter the world; he had clung to ideals in a world ruled by hypocrisy. Narottam Sarangi could not earn a livelihood. He grew completely disillusioned and at last decided to end his life.

I wish Narottam were born in a rich family. To be born poor is to be born as a sinner. A caste certificate, a recommendation letter, a spineless personality - one always needs one of these things in order to survive.

His last wish- "I thank whoever except the police performs my last rites, from the depth my heart. He is my true friend. I salute him. Farewell friend, goodbye to all. Goodbye."

The diary entry on the last day of his life came to an end.

Drops of tear fell from my eyes on the diary.

The Criminal

The train pulled out from the Howrah station. Mr. S. Sadananda was returning from Delhi and was on his way to Madras. Due to pilots' strike, he could not travel by air and had to take the Coromondal express. With great difficulty, the travel agent could arrange a second-class ticket.

He kept thinking about his building which was under construction in Delhi as he lay awake on the bed of the berth number seventythree. Sleep was slowly overpowering him. The T.T. came up to him and asked him to show his ticket. He got up and took out the ticket from his purse. The T.T. put a tick against Mr. S. Sadananda, age- 45 and returned the ticket to him. Then the T.T. lost his temper when he saw a child sleeping under his berth and asked him for the ticket. The terror-stricken child said, 'Sir, I have not had any food for the last two days. I don't have any money. They threw me out of their house, where I was serving and did not give me any money. Please save me. I am no thief.' The T.T. was in no mood to listen to him. He said, 'In the next station, the police will find out if you are telling the truth.'

Mr. S. Sadananda heard the T.T.'s words and looked at the child, who was pleading desperately. Tears rolled down the child's cheeks.

Mr. Sadananda looked at the T.T. and said, 'Sir, if you don't have any objection, I will buy a ticket for this boy? I believe he is not a thief.' He gave the money to the T.T. and made the boy sit next him and wiped his tears.

* * * *

The train was moving very fast Sania's mind was blank when he boarded the train at Bhubaneswar. To save his own life, he had run in the dark all the way to the station. His body was shivering.

He was sweating profusely. He did not dare take a bus. With great difficulty, he arrived at the platform number four. His hands and legs were aching. Just at this moment the Coromondal Express had pulled into the station. Without thinking twice, he jumped into one of the compartments and spread his towel under a seat and went to sleep, as he was dog-tired.

When day broke, Sania tried to recollect yesterday's incidents. Why did he do such a thing? What would his mother think? What would happen to his mother, poor old woman? How would she live?

His mother had sent him to the Babu's house in the hope that if he worked there, he would land a job one day. The Babu's ancestral house was in his village. When his wife had gone to the village, she had called his mother and said, 'Look Sania's mother, send your son with us. He will stay in our house and help me with house work. I will ask Babu to find him a job somewhere.'

Sania's mother felt very happy when she heard this. The boy had discontinued his studies. She did not have the money to pay his school fees. She had no land where she could raise crops. There was no work available in the village, either the memsahib would help her boy by giving him a job somewhere. When Sania's mother heard this, she threw herself at the memsahib's feet. After much persuasion, Sania agreed to accompany the memsahib to the town. Six years had gone by. The ten year old Sania was now a boy of sixteen.

He did not know how these six years passed. He had never tried to remember that. What is the value of remembering that? He had gone through all the tortures of his master in the hope that one day he would get a job. He would do all the household work. He would wake up before anyone else in the house did, make tea for his master, prepare breakfast, cook lunch, do the dishes, wash clothes and do errands uncomplainingly.

He toiled like a beast, not like a human being. He would massage the mistress's legs and remain all the time at her beck and call.

Whatever food was left over he would eat. Two pairs of trousers and shirts and a little food which never filled his belly – this was what he got during six long years in the master's house: He had forgotten his mother's affection. His mother always dreamt of a happy future for Sania. She had dreamt that memsahib would get him employed somewhere. After all, he had served her for so long. Sania went on slogging day and night in the hope of landing a job.

He could not go to his village to see his mother. Whenever he planned to go to his village, the Babu's wife would roar, 'Go back to your village, and ask your mother to feed you. Can this stupid boy work at any place? See, jobs are not lying scattered on the road that I would go and pick one up and give it to you. People do not get a job after years of working and even paying bribes. And this boy thinks he would get one for free. Go if you like, we can get many like you. We do not want to fritter away our wealth feeding idle rogues like you. You, who do not do a shred of work, memsahib would grumble like this all day.

So Sania never made a trip to his village. His mother would send him letters. She longed to see her son. For six long years, Sania's days passed in this manner. Last year when he wanted to go to his village, memsahib flew into a rage. The Babu somehow brought her to let him go and gave him twenty for his mother was seriously ill.

Arriving at his village, when he saw his mother's condition, he did not at all want to return to his master's house. He overstayed by two days. When his mother's condition improved, she forced him to go back to the Babu's house. But he did not want to leave his mother. He did not want to listen to the hard words of memsahib. He pleaded with his mother, 'Maa, I don't want any job. I would earn my living as a labourer. I would live in the village with you. I don't want to go to that house again. I need not do any job.'

But his mother tried to make him change his mind. Her sorrows would vanish when he found a job.

Five days later, when he returned from his village and paid his respects to the memsahib, she simply turned her back and went into her room in a huff. The Babu came and said, angrily, 'Is this a house or a lodging house? Whenever you wish you come, and whenever you like you leave. If you don't want to stay here, why don't you say that clearly?'

When Sania tried to tell them about his mother's illness, the memsahib screamed, 'What would have happened, if that old woman had died?'

This Sania found too much to bear. Tears rolled down his cheeks in grief. He stood still. He needed a job. His mother had sent him to this house in the hope of a job. Six years had passed by. He had been silently putting up with the hardships all these years. If he revolted now, then the job, which he might get in near future, would slip through his fingers. He could not throw dust on his mother's dreams. Sania wiped his tears and got down to doing house work. He took his master's son, Sobhan to school, cooked meals, washed clothes, and massaged the memsahib's legs.

Days went by. He sheepishly asked the Babu about the job a couple of times. He could never muster the courage to ask the memsahib about it. The Babu said nothing to make him feel hopeful.

If after toiling for six years, he did not get a job, then what would he do? His head reeled when he thought about this. One day he determined that he would tell his master about this. He went to the market to bring vegetables and when he returned he found Babu talking to someone over phone. The memsahib was sitting near him. She shouted, 'Sania, bring three cups of tea.'

Sania was giving the teacup to his master when the guest said, 'For the time being, keep ten thousand rupees. When the job is confirmed, then I will give another ten.'

Sania lay the tray on the tea table and returned to the kitchen. He could not concentrate on cooking. He had heard that there was a post

lying vacant in his master's office. He was sure he would be given this job. But when he found that the job was given to someone else, he was filled with anger and bitterness. He could easily see that his master would never give him this job as he took money from that person. He finally decided to ask for a job for one last time, and, when he was serving dinner, asked diffidently, 'A post is lying vacant at your office; would not you give it to me?'

The babu exploded. He rose to his feet and started hitting and kicking him,'What did you say? You bloody servant, you have such guts? Telling me such things in the face? I will finish you off if ever you talk like this again.'

Sania rolled on the ground. His body was covered with bruises. The memsahib came, a broomstick in hand, and landed blows after blows on his back.

All day long Sania lay in a corner. No one asked him to have his food. His eyes had swollen from crying. The fire of revenge now raged inside his heart.

Night passed and day broke. Sania got up and busied himself with doing the chores. As if nothing had happened the day before. He took Sobhan, the only son of his master to school. In the afternoon, at four o' clock, when he was going to bring Sobhan from school, the memsahib, looking at Sania, said, 'If you want to remain in this house, never ever utter a word about the job again.'

Sania said nothing and then made his way towards the school. That road seemed unfamiliar to him. It appeared as if every body made fun of him. He could not pedal the cycle, energetically.

The school bell rang. He seated Sobhan in the front seat and headed for Babu's house. The cycle moved along a curvy road. He took another route today. Sobhan was studying in standard three. Sania gave him a chocolate. He told him that he was going to show him birds and pedalled the cycle vigorously. It was as if Sania was possessed and did not know what he was doing.

In a quiet lane, he set Sobhan down and took him behind a bush. Then he brought out a knife he had kept concealed in his trousers. He stabbed Sobhan a number of times Sobhan's father had not kept his promise of giving him a job. He would take revenge on him. His body shivered with anger. Sobhan writhed in pain and died.

Suddenly he realized he had killed the child. He hid the knife under the bush and washed his blood-stained hands in a nearby pond. No, noone was there. He started running, leaving the cycle leaning against a tree.

He had murdered the child. What crimes had that innocent child committed? Sania ran across fields and forests and arrived at railway station and got into the Coromomdol Express.

The train slowed down. It was approaching Visakhapatnam station. The vendors called out, 'Coffee, coffee.'

Sania came out and washed his face. He had two rupees in his pocket. He took a cup of coffee. He walked to and fro in the station. He walked past the policemen once, again walked past them without being noticed.

Fear lost its grip over him. He had committed no crime. He did not look upon himself as a criminal. He did not want to think about the incident that had happened the previous evening. He did not want to think of what he had gone through in the last six years.

The train let out a whistle. Slowly, it moved out of the station. Sania ran and jumped into the train and occupied his seat. He looked out of the window. Fields stretched as far as the horizon.

The train gradually gained speed. The vermilion rays of the sun filled through the window glasses. Gusts of air entered the compartment. Sania closed his eyes.

The train arrived at Chennai central. Sania got down from the train not knowing where to go. He lost himself in the milling crowd of the city.

Chaitanya

A dusty road leads you into a sleepy village called Mangalpur. Rows of thatched houses stand quietly, like naughty children under the stern scrutiny of a schoolmaster.

A street dog tried to curl up and snatch a nap. He started at the sound of my bike, howled its usual howl and again buried his face into his legs. Village children, paying no heed to the swirl of dust and smoke, ran behind my bike as it ran down the country road. When I applied the brakes and parked it outside the premises of a mutt, they circled around my bike and some wanted to touch it and yet some kept looking at it as a queer thing.

Many mahants, sanyasins and ordinary people had already gathered in the mutt when I reached there. The old mahant of the mutt had breathed his last twelve days before. The preparation for the ceremonial feast went on for the coronation of the new mahant. He ran from here and there exuding an air of authority and trying to throw his weight about after the death of the old mahant. I left my shoes at the door and went to the temple and prostrated myself before the images of Radha and Krishna.

Tears welled up in my eyes. Many a time, like this, I have come here. It was such an unforgettable part of my childhood. I would pick up the gangasiuli flowers that lay scattered here and there on the ground before stepping into the mutt. The smell of wet soil mingled with the fragrance of flowers filled my heart with joy. My childhood memories were entangled with the memories of the mutt. In a flash, those memories came alive before my eyes in the speed of lightning.

The late mahant was my father's elder brother. We called him Mahant Bapa. He always felt extremely happy whenever we went to

him. And if we asked him for something, he would retort, "What property has the mutt? What can I give you?" But then I never went there in the hope of any profit, but to experience the sheer magic of the mutt and its ambience.

Sometimes he would tell us about his childhood, of how he became the mahant there. He would turn the pages of times gone by one after the other before me. As he narrated these episodes, his eyes would reflect his yearnings to realize the Absolute. When he was still at school, he had come to this mutt. His relations with the then mahant grew, which later metamorphosed, into a relation of a master and a disciple. He decided to take up the oath of celibacy and spent his life as a monk in the mutt. Initially, every body opposed in the family, but he stood firm on his decision. He wanted to become a chaitanya. He longed to stay away from the illusions of the world. He was only twenty-two when his guru breathed his last and he took over charge as the mahant. From then for the next sixty years he would give his heart to the management of the mutt.

I looked around and paced about in the courtyard. Ganesh was sitting at the fireplace where the cooking went on. His feet barely touched the ground. He ran from one end of the mutt to the other. He was needed at every place. The moment his eyes fell on me, he hurried towards me, "You came! Very well, indeed. If you hadn't come, people would have said that they didn't even come to attend the rituals. But of course, you won't come afterwards. I know that. The mahant stood by us through thick and thin. It is difficult to find such a person like him. Well, well, we will talk later." Ganesh left to attend to some work before he had finished his sentence.

My eyes followed Ganesh. He had been in the mutt since his childhood. His father had come to this mutt with this child, who had lost his mother. He still works as one of the servants in the mutt. He grew up in mahant's care after his father's death. Mahant gave some land and property after he got married and helped him settle. The

ever-grateful Ganesh often came to the mahant and worked as an errand boy. How could he relax when there was so much to do at his funeral feast!

He was not the only one whom the Mahant had placed under an obligation. He brought many such people on many occasions and kept in the mutt. It was his usual practice. Some of them were really funny. One day, an obese man arrived at the mutt. Mahant's joy knew no bounds as if he had found a treasure. He gave him shelter at the mutt. He decided to make him his disciple and started giving him counsel. But one day it was found that the man had vanished from the mutt. No one ever saw him again after that. Later, it was learnt that he was involved in two murder cases and had come to stay in the mutt to hide himself from the police and to avoid any chances of getting arrested.

Mahant was not at all good at understanding human beings. He was a peculiar and unusual person. People spoke many things about his peculiarities. He was an expert at fuelling disputes by buying and selling land. He had earned much money through selling land and by that had sown the seeds of quarrel among the villagers. I had often heard him saying, "Now a days people are so notorious, the only way to control them is to keep their land in your control."

His life endlessly fascinated me. I always mulled over his moves through life. He was desperate to make a disciple, an heir for the mutt. He was not successful though in his endeavour. Then one day he came in contact with a Brahmin family, and they started to live with him in the mutt. It was a big family; the middle-aged couple, their three young sons, the eldest son's wife and their toddling son. The Brahmin was engaged in offering puja to the images. Mahant initiated his middle son into disciplehood. The whole family stayed permanently at the mutt and their authority grew more palpable on every matter concerning the mutt. When I went there I felt like an outsider, an unwelcome guest. Obviously, my presence made them feel insecure. Even Mahanta Bapa could sense this unease, but what could he do?

He was helpless, like a mouse in a trap. Gradually the ever-flowing stream of his love for me grew thin. Even the great seer Biswamitra yielded to temptations and fell madly in love with Urvashi. Comets fall from the sky. The mahant was but an ordinary monk! The mahant's attachment with this family grew. The austere life of a monk, which he had embraced, did not last forever. He forgot the ideals of a Chaitanya. He lost active interest in the affairs of the mutt. He forgot the time when bells were rung inside the sanctum of the mutt, when the deities were offered prasad. He forgot his beloved Radha and Krishna. The mahant who uttered 'Radhe' 'Krishna' for hours on end came to the doors of the temple only once in a blue moon. It was as if he had put his gods out of his heart. Under the spell of Maya he forgot the Absolute, in search of whom he had left his home.

I remembered the last time when I had come to the mutt when the mahant was still alive. I had gone to meet him after a long interval of time. A strange silence prevailed over the mutt. The doors of the mahant's room were open. He was lying on a mattress on the ground. I went and sat near him. He had become thin and looked sallow. I looked at him. Tears rolled down my cheeks. He told me, "What did I gain from leaving you all and embracing this life! I would have had a less complicated life had I led a worldly life." After all these years, these words coming from his mouth made me feel that he had in all these years deceived himself.

Ganesh's call brought me back to my senses. "Come, have food. The Mahant wouldn't return if you brood. You know, he had promised to give some money for my daughter's marriage. Perhaps he would have given."

People came in groups and returned after having *prasad*. I looked at them sitting on a palmfrond mattress at the doorstep mahant's room. He had said, "I will be fine very soon. The Lord appeared before me in a vision and held my hands.' I felt that at long last he had surrendered

himself at the feet of Lord Krishna, for whom he had once left everything.

I was away from my hometown for a fortnight. On my return, I found a telegram among the bunch of letters. It read, 'Mahant Bapa breathed his last.' The news, though sad, was not shocking. His end was near, I had intuitively felt this in our last meeting.

The Mahant had sailed off on his last journey.

I lay down on the front veranda of his mutt and gazed at the images inside the temple, trying to understand the Lord's inscrutable leela. The kirtanias sang loudly, "You hear or not, we offer our prayers to you. O! Lord." I raised my folded hands to the sky.

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